Position Statement by the Gaylee/Austinville Ratepayers Association (GARPA)

GARPA
STRONGER TOGETHER

RE: Proposed High-Density Housing Development in Welmoed Area

Date: 7 August 2025

To:
The City of Cape Town
Mayoral Committee for Human Settlements
Ward Councillor - Kariena Mare
Sub-council: Sub-council 21
Relevant Planning and Environmental Departments

Introduction

The Gaylee/Austinville Ratepayers Association (GARPA) represents the residents of a historically marginalised community that has long endured underinvestment, inadequate infrastructure, and limited municipal responsiveness. We write to express our **deep concern and strong objection** to the approval and rollout of the proposed housing development, which is set to bring an estimated **40,000 new residents** into a geographically confined space within our ward - **more than doubling** the current population of approximately **38,000** (2011 census).

While GARPA supports dignified housing for all, we **cannot support** any development that is approved without **clear, funded, and time-bound infrastructure upgrades** in place beforehand.

1. Infrastructure and Services Already in Crisis

Our area is currently grappling with the following chronic issues:

- **Education:** Severe shortage of schools, classroom space, and teaching staff.
- **Healthcare:** Under-resourced clinics and no immediate access to hospitals.
- **Electricity:** Ageing infrastructure, load-bearing transformers at capacity, and ongoing/ sustained blackouts.
- **Water & Sanitation:** Inadequate pressure, recurring water cuts, and blocked sewerage systems.

- **Transport:** Existing roads cannot sustain current traffic volumes; congestion is at dangerous levels.

- **Public Safety:** One police station already overburdened, with response times ranging from delayed to non-existent. Crime- including house break-ins, assaults, and murders - has escalated alarmingly with no resolution in sight.

The addition of (+-35,000 residents will **collapse the remaining fragile systems** and directly threaten the safety and wellbeing of existing and incoming communities.

2. Impact on Property Values and Quality of Life

Without infrastructure upgrades, this development risks replicating the **deterioration seen in other Cape Town communities** subjected to rapid densification without proper support. Based on similar cases in places like Dunoon, Philippi, and parts of Khayelitsha:

- **Property values decline significantly.**

- **Crime and lawlessness increase.**

- **Overburdened malls, parks, and community spaces become unusable.**

This would further entrench economic disparities and exacerbate the **ongoing legacy of the Group Areas Act**, where communities of colour are systematically denied the amenities and safety found in more affluent areas.

3. City-Wide Precedents and Warnings

Numerous municipal and oversight reports have flagged the city's slow infrastructure rollout. For example:

- The 2023 **Western Cape Police Oversight Report** highlighted unacceptable response times and rising crime rates in areas of unmanaged growth.

- The 2022 **City of Cape Town Infrastructure Backlog Assessment** warned that "rapid densification without parallel investment is unsustainable and poses a risk to social cohesion."

- A News24 investigative report published in March 2025 documented the collapse of public services in communities forced to absorb high-density housing without planning.

4. Environmental and Geological Risks – Aquifers and Marshlands

One of the most pressing but often overlooked risks associated with the proposed housing development is the **impact on the aquifer systems** and surrounding **marshlands** that form a natural perimeter around Blackheath. These wetlands are not simply vacant land - they are **integral to the hydrological stability and geological integrity** of the area[1][2].

4.1. Aquifers as a Structural Foundation

- The marshlands serve as **natural recharge zones** for the underground aquifers[1][2].
- These aquifers contribute significantly to the **stability of the bedrock** in the region, acting as a natural buffer against soil collapse[3].
- Disruption of these zones - through **filling, draining, or stripping -** can compromise this stability, increasing the risk of **soil subsidence**[3][4].

4.2. Potential for Sinkhole Formation

- When aquifers are disrupted or drained, voids can form underground[3][4].
- Over time, this can lead to **sinkholes**, which may swallow entire homes, roadways, or even large sections of neighbourhoods[5][6].
- Such geological events are **largely irreversible** and carry substantial costs in damages, displacement, and loss of life or property[7][8].

4.3. Long-Term Consequences

- Once compromised, aquifer systems take decades - if not centuries - to recover, if recovery is possible at all[9].
- Property owners, insurers, and the City may face **unprecedented and unforeseen financial liabilities** due to damage stemming from poor environmental planning[7][8].
- The marshlands also serve as **biodiversity hotspots** and **natural flood mitigators**, reducing the impact of heavy rains and stormwater surges[10].

5. Recommendation

GARPA strongly recommends that **no development approval** be granted without:

1. A **comprehensive geological and hydrological survey** of the proposed site and surrounding marshlands.

2. A **publicly available Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA)** that specifically addresses aquifer disruption risks.

3. Binding conditions that **protect and preserve recharge zones**, with development plans adapted to avoid interference.

In summary:
The destruction or alteration of marshland and aquifer systems poses a **direct threat to the structural safety** of future housing, existing properties, and the lives of residents. To proceed without thorough study and safeguards would be both environmentally reckless and legally negligent.

References

Footnotes and Citations:

1. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark%3A/48223/pf0000379962?utm_source=chatgpt.com

2. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/29626943_The_Role_of_Wetlands_in_the_Hydrological_Cycle?utm_source=chatgpt.com

3. https://www.ft.com/content/fc93b7c1-edf8-4b8a-8ba8-246c1cb3cbd4?utm_source=chatgpt.com

4. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark%3A/48223/pf0000380743?utm_source=chatgpt.com

5. https://www.usgs.gov/water-science-school/science/land-subsidence?utm_source=chatgpt.com

6. https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12665-025-12225-0?utm_source=chatgpt.com

7. https://www.theguardian.com/science/2024/sep/25/terrawatch-sinkholes-iran-groundwater-depletion-crisis?utm_source=chatgpt.com

8. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/29626943_The_Role_of_Wetlands_in_the_Hydrological_Cycle

6. Response to Potential Downplaying of Subsidence Concerns

GARPA acknowledges that we are not aware of any recent, site-specific geological survey of the Blackheath marshland and aquifer system has been undertaken. However, the absence of local data does not justify dismissing the potential risks outright - it underlines the **urgent need for independent investigation before large-scale development proceeds**.

Internationally, the correlation between aquifer disruption, wetland loss, and subsidence is well-established by bodies such as the **United States Geological Survey (USGS)** and **UNESCO**. Numerous case studies - including urban areas in the USA, Asia, and Europe - have demonstrated that disturbing groundwater recharge zones can cause irreversible structural instability, sometimes years after development is complete.

GARPA is not asserting that catastrophic sinkholes are inevitable in Blackheath. Rather, we maintain that without an **independent, peer-reviewed Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA)** and **comprehensive geotechnical survey**, any claims that the risk is negligible are **speculative and unsubstantiated**.

It is standard practice in responsible urban planning to:

1. **Assess and map aquifer recharge zones** prior to large-scale land alteration.

2. Incorporate **conservation buffers** around sensitive wetland and marshland areas.

3. **Model the long-term hydrological effects** of development on soil stability.

This approach does not halt development - it ensures that it is safe, sustainable, and compliant with both environmental regulations and disaster risk reduction principles.

GARPA therefore urges the MEC and relevant authorities to adopt the precautionary principle:

“Where there is credible evidence of potential harm, even without full scientific certainty, action should be taken to avoid or minimise that harm.”

7. GARPA’s Position

GARPA **does not oppose housing development** or the constitutional right to housing. However, we demand:

- A **moratorium** on the current development approval process until a **full impact assessment** is conducted with community participation.

- An independent review of infrastructure readiness by third-party engineers.

- A published plan for:
    - School and clinic expansion
    - Road upgrades and public transport integration
    - Safety and policing reinforcement
    - Public amenities and environmental protection
- A formal commitment by the City to **phase development only after** these deliverables are met.

8. Conclusion

We are not objecting for the sake of resistance. We are objecting to protect the dignity, safety, and long-term sustainability of our community - and those who will soon join us. To allow this project to proceed without the necessary groundwork is to **invite disaster**.

We invite all decision-makers to engage us directly and transparently before any final decisions are made.

Sincerely,
Westly Lewis
Chairperson
Gaylee/Austinville Ratepayers Association (GARPA)